Childhood Trauma Among Black Women Linked to Worse Heart Health

Childhood trauma in Black women can cause arterial stiffness, increasing their risk for heart failure, stroke and more.

March 18, 2025 By Laura Schmidt

Researchers found an association between childhood trauma and heart health in Black women, adding to evidence suggesting that stress, trauma and discrimination negatively impact physical health, according to a study published in the Journal of the American Heart Association.

"Heart disease is still the number one killer of women," said lead study author Telisa Spikes, RN, PhD, an assistant professor at Emory University's Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing, in a university news release.

The study examined the relationship between childhood exposure to trauma and vascular dysfunction among 400 Black adults in Atlanta between 30 and 70 years old.

Using a 27-item questionnaire, participants self-reported on childhood trauma (distressing experiences that threaten the safety of a child), including emotional, physical and sexual abuse, while researchers measured markers of vascular health.

The study found that Black women who experienced childhood trauma had worse vascular function compared with men.

What's more, researchers found that childhood trauma in women can cause arterial stiffness, an impaired artery function of the cardiovascular system associated with an increased risk for cardiovascular events, including heart failure, stroke and heart attack. Additionally, arterial stiffness contributes to heart disease, high blood pressure and a poorly functioning small blood vessel system, which can damage tissues in the kidneys or brain.

Women may experience stress differently than men because of the different forms of trauma they are exposed to and how frequently they occur. In fact, evidence shows that girls are more likely to be exposed to sexual abuse, while boys are more likely to experience physical abuse, according to the study. The study findings also suggest that women may be more vulnerable to a larger cumulative stress burden.

“This exposure to trauma had a more consequential effect on the cardiovascular health of Black women over Black men, and that was very eye-opening,” Spikes said. “This may explain why we are seeing such an increased burden of high blood pressure in Black women, and why it’s happening earlier in life compared to women from other racial-ethnic backgrounds.”

Spikes encourages clinicians to consider including a trauma assessment in the patient intake process to help identify and address the risk for cardiovascular disease.

“It is widely known that women process and appraise stressors differently and are more impacted by that neurobiological process,” Spikes said. “Depression and cardiovascular disease are synergistic—they go hand in hand. Mental well-being has a profound impact on physical health outcomes, and adding a psychosocial questionnaire for the patients could be an important clinical screening tool for risk assessment.”

In related news, a study published last year in JAMA Network Open found that racial discrimination may accelerate aging in Black women and increase their risk for heart disease and diabetes.

What’s more, another study found that Black Americans who experience racial discrimination during midlife had an increased likelihood of showing signs of Alzheimer’s disease and neurodegeneration.

To read more, click #Stress or #Cardiovascular. There, you’ll see headlines such as “Heart Disease Remains Leading Cause of U.S. Deaths,” “NIH Awards $3.7M Grant to Study Impact of Racism on Aging” and “How Well Do Hospitals Track Discrimination and Culturally Competent Care?”

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/childhood-trauma-among-black-women-linked-worse-heart-health